

NUTRITION

Food Allergy and Intolerances

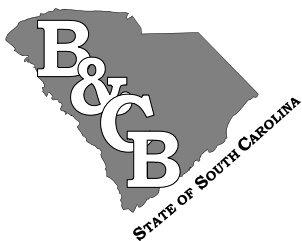
Food allergies or food intolerances affect nearly everyone at some point. People often have an unpleasant reaction to something they ate and wonder if they have a food allergy. One out of three people say that they have a food allergy. But only about three percent of children have clinically proven allergic reactions to foods. In adults, the prevalence of food allergy drops to about one percent of the total population.

This difference between the clinically proven prevalence of food allergy and the public perception of the problem is in part due to reactions called "food intolerances" rather than food allergies. A food allergy or hypersensitivity is an abnormal response to a food that is triggered by the immune system. The immune system is not responsible for the symptoms of food intolerances, even though these symptoms can resemble those of a food allergy.

Diagnosis means distinguishing food allergy from food intolerance or other illnesses. If a patient goes to the doctor's office and says, "I think I have a food allergy," the doctor has to consider the list of other possibilities that may lead to symptoms that could be confused with food allergy. A common cause of food intolerance that is often confused with a food allergy is lactase deficiency. This most common food intolerance affects at least one out of 10 people. Lactase is an enzyme that is in the lining of the gut. This enzyme degrades lactose, which is in milk products. Instead, the lactose is used by bacteria, gas is formed and the person experiences bloating, abdominal pain and sometimes diarrhea.

Food allergies are caused by immunologic reactions to foods. There are several different diseases under this category and a number of foods that can cause these problems. After one suspects a food allergy, a medical evaluation is the key to proper management. Treatment is basically avoiding the food(s) after it is identified. People with food allergies should become knowledgeable about allergies and how they are treated, and should work with their physicians.

For more information concerning food allergies and food intolerances contact the following organizations: **American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, 1-800-822-2762 U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 1-800-835-4709**



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